

A case for torture redux

by Martha Rosler

Introducing *A Simple Case For Torture* by Chuck Kleinhans

Martha Rosler's essay below reconsiders her 1983 experimental video, *A Simple Case for Torture* in the context of torture as a government authorized interrogation method in the George W. Bush presidency. While some things have changed, the tape remains startlingly prescient and relevant to today's political situation. (A number of Rosler's video works can be found online at Ubuweb: <http://ubu.com/film/rosler.html>). With 24's Jack Bauer weekly pushing the edge of the ends vs. means argument over torture, media images intersect with the need for ideological analysis.

When it first appeared *A Simple Case for Torture* forcefully intervened in key civic issues of the early Reagan era:

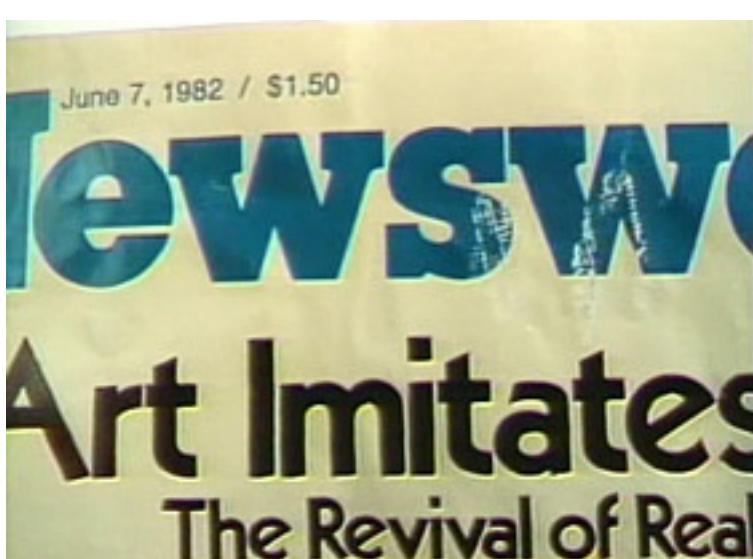
- U.S. training of police and military torturers in Latin America, Vietnam, and elsewhere in the developing world;
- state terrorism;
- a deliberate cranking up of the arms race with the Soviets;
- an increasing discussion of the U.S. using nuclear weapons in foreign combats;
- the slashing of federal social programs;
- the growing gap between rich and poor; dramatizing terrorism as a form of fear-mongering;
- U.S. alliances with repressive military regimes while posing as a champion of "democracy."

The hour long video is best described as a visual essay relentlessly arguing its point of view with an exhaustive and exhausting piling on of arguments and counter-arguments, news articles as demonstration and data, and a layered sound track of assertive quotes and narration. Unprepared audiences are startled by the fierce point of attack, which never lets up or modulates in tone, though it does change in topic and emphasis along the way. There are no humanistic interviews with experts and authorities gently offering a personable face and voice. The video continually asks its viewers to concentrate on the ideas presented. It is one of the most insistently didactic videos ever made.

The piece represents one important aspect of Rosler's artistic career in visual arts, performance, installation, video, and critical essay. [A full record to 1998 is in Catherine de Zegher, ed., *Martha Rosler: Positions in the Life World*, MIT Press] But it also fits into a larger set of political art-world concerns of its time. The emergence of semiotic and



Crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan. The video enters the dramatic space of the hypothetical terrorist nuclear bomb threat.



Pan and scan over cover of *Newsweek* with op-ed essay on torture.



A hand turns the magazine's pages revealing the ordinary contrast of text and attractive consumer advertising images.



Page turns to a "My Turn" guest editorial opinion essay, "The Case for Torture," by professor Michael Levin.



A pan left shows the adjoining page, an ad sponsored by U.S. banking interests addresses fears of losing one's money (at a moment of the Reagan Recession). The terrified sleepless man is assured that putting his money in a

ideological analysis of images in the 60s and 70s brought an analytic frame to what might be seen as "natural" or "taken-for-granted" visual material. Roland Barthes' famous discussion of an image of an African soldier saluting the French colonial flag began a period of scrutiny that reappeared in diverse forms. This path was joined by Situationist confrontations such as Guy Debord's ironic re-appropriations of mass culture for tendentious critique.

Jean-Luc Godard's use of book covers as interpolated intertitles in the films *Two Or Three Things I Know About Her* (1966) and *Le Gai Savoir* (1968) or the insistent analysis of a single photo of Jane Fonda in Vietnam in *Letter to Jane* (Godard and Gorin. 1972) created a new form of political analysis. Godard continued to pursue this in much of his television work of the 1970s, such as *Over and Under Communication: 6 X 2*, with Miéville (1976), which contains a memorable analysis of a French newsweekly magazine in which he tears out all the advertising and ends up with a small pile of editorial pages against a large pile of ads, dramatically pointing out the cash nexus of "news" publishing.

Many forms of analysis contributed to this kind of analysis. From an academic sociological perspective, Erving Goffman's *Gender Advertisements* teased out the connotations of commercial images. At the same time, U.S. artists, across the various arts often responded to political and social issues of the day with similar attention to extracting, underlining, dramatizing, and confronting the dominant ideological materials of the day. Pop Art ironically recirculated commercial world images. Postmodern appropriations ranged from severe critique to mild snark through juxtaposition. This kind of work ranged from Barbara Kruger's poster images with a contrary text calling for thinking through and past habitual thought to AIDS activism confronting the dominant media's bias in covering the early stages of the pandemic. Hans Haacke's installations confronted the ideological nature of art institutions and elite ownership of art. The mainstream of radical media art adapted familiar televisual and social documentary forms, as with Marlon Riggs' *Ethnic Notions* (1986), an analysis of racist images of African Americans in popular culture.

In this context, *A Simple Case for Torture* contributes to the analytic strain of video art with a vengeance. Like a terrier gripping its prey, Rosler savages an editorial column written by a philosophy professor making an "ends vs. means" argument justifying torture under a "ticking bomb" scenario. Literally layering the screen with news articles whose headlines back up her points and contradict her opponent, Rosler overwhelms any attempt at careful processual thinking. The image track is matched with a layered sound track reading news items and theoretical analyses of the dominant discourse. The tape ends with a credit roll bibliography referencing major thinkers such as Hannah Arendt, Michael Foucault, and Theodor Adorno. The standard "rule of thumb" for expository lectures of providing one major idea every 10 minutes is abandoned in the first 20 seconds of the analysis' eruption. For most audiences, especially if unprepared, the effect is startling and alienating. Yet the form also evidences Rosler's passion to explain.

This relentlessness can be read in different ways. Her earlier video work such as the short, deadpan comic, and didactic *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) juxtaposes gender politics with a cooking-show type of

bank provides the solution to his worries.



Computer-generated text intertitles echo key words in the essay as the text is read on the voice track. The intertitles serve to emphasize and simultaneously question the essay's rhetoric and thus meaning.



Several minutes into the video, the title appears.

presentation. *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977) records a performance of Rosler being stripped and measured in a technological, clinical reduction of personhood to data. Made for Paper Tiger TV, a series of low production cost analyses of (mostly print) media, *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue* (1982) dissects the fashion magazine's gender politics. And in the 1985 piece *If It's Too Bad to Be True, It Could Be DISINFORMATION*, Rosler takes on government propaganda which has promoted false news reports to further secret policies; here she uses a form of unremittingly bombarding the viewer. Writing of *Vital Statistics*, Laura Kipnis describes it as "an experiment in radical unpleasure," stressing its contrast to the dominant forms of "visual pleasure" which naturalize ideology.

While risking audience alienation, Rosler's work of this period in her career mixes acidic irony with in-your-face aggression and demands to be taken seriously as an intellectual stance. Fifteen years later, it remains the case that women critics can seldom get the kind of media respect accorded to aggressive males. (For a current example, consider how deftly MSNBC's Rachel Maddow must navigate combining her intelligence, wit, and irony with an endlessly smiling face — "see, I'm no threat!" — and fashionably dykey look and demeanor.) Revisiting *A Simple Case* teaches us about both about torture and the forms of the dominant ideology.

A case for torture redux

by Martha Rosler

I.

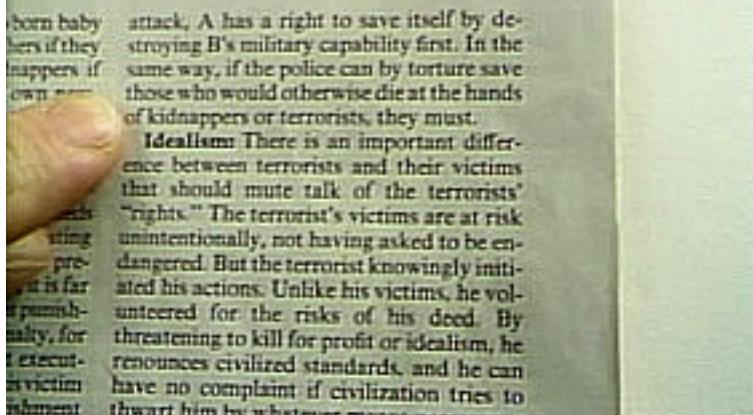
In 1982 I was en route somewhere and picked up a copy of *Newsweek* that — unusually, to my mind — featured a contemporary painting on the cover, a "realist" one by an artist whom I did not know. It struck me as odd that, in that moment of (neo-neo-) Expressionist, mostly Italian and German, painting, the featured work was a modest little portrait of a sitting woman. But lo! the breasts of this young, rather ordinary looking woman slightly slumped in her seat were exposed. The headline was THE NEW REALISM. I opened the magazine and leafed past the ads and the table of contents. The first article caught my eye: a full-page "My Turn" column (the type now called "op ed," or guest editorial). The title? "The Case for Torture." I was shocked, and I was meant to be, for this article was a provocation. The belligerent, rhetoric-spouting president, Ronald Reagan, was ratcheting up the Cold War, smashing what remained of Jimmy Carter's détente by planting nuclear-armed Cruise missiles in Western Europe ... and some obscure nut had made his way onto *Newsweek*'s front page arguing for the United States to torture people — to embrace torture as policy. Such advocacy was unheard-of in polite, not to say academic, circles — the author was a philosophy professor, as we shall see. And it certainly contravened anything you might read or hear in the media or in official pronouncements.

Officially, of course, we as a nation were on the side of justice and human rights, despite the many reports, throughout the previous

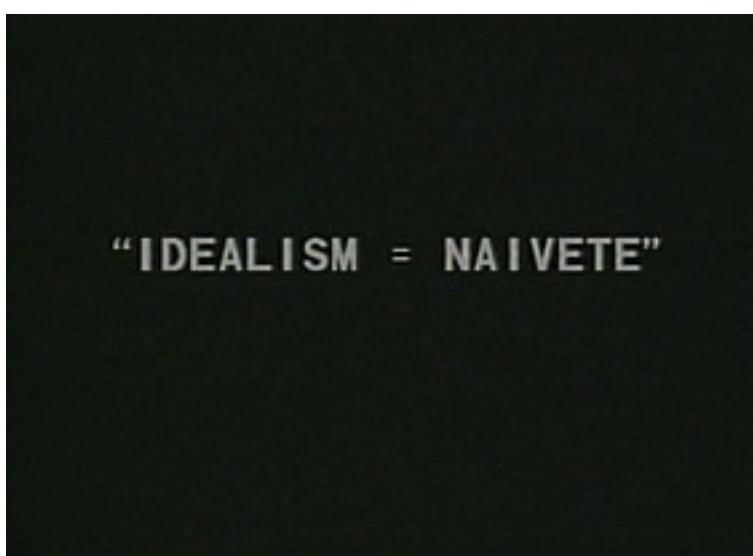


A rapid pan pulls back to re-present the paired pages of monetary anxiety and terrorist anxiety. The banking industry offers fiscal security while the neocon philosophy professor argues state-conducted torture will offer civil security.

torture



Close up follows voice reading the essay.



Intertitles dramatize the professor's ideology and method of argument.



decade, of the chronic use of torture by the Latin American military and its death squads, supposedly under the tutelage of the United States — a relationship unreported in the mainstream media. Torture and brutalization of military prisoners and suspected enemies had also reputedly been widely practiced during the war in Vietnam, but reports of that had been quickly swept under the rug, along with the most widely publicized war crime, the My Lai massacre[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] which finally saw a reluctant prosecution well after the event. As signatories to the Geneva Convention, the United States insisted on the need for dignified and humane treatment for military prisoners — at least in public, and at least for home consumption. But now, in 1982, something seemed to have changed.

I discovered from the by-line and short bio accompanying the *Newsweek* column that the tendentious screed — for that is what it was — was written by one Michael Levin, an obscure philosophy professor at The City College of New York. His argument mixed together sentimental fears for hypothetical kidnapped infants and the equally hypothetical parental desire to inflict pain on the perpetrators ; fear of Arab plane hijackers (a repetitive scenario in the 1970s); and fear of a nut with an atom bomb in Manhattan, where, of course, City College stands. The answer to the inevitable question Levin poses, “Won’t we turn into them ?” was predictable in advance. This smarmy fellow[2] tried to argue that like the (failed) plot to kill Hitler (in 1944), torture, judiciously applied, far from marking a descent into barbarism, was a moral imperative. Could *you* sleep at night if your prissy scruples led to the death of 6 or 8 million innocent New Yorkers?

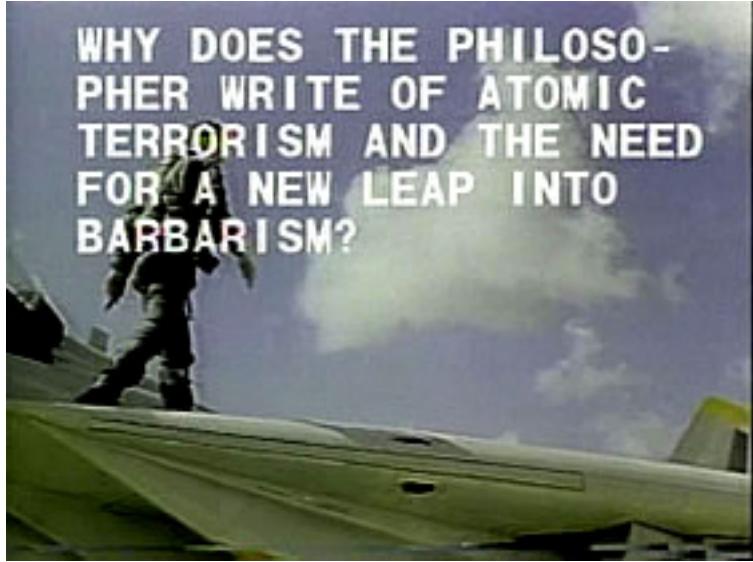
Here is Charles Krauthammer, prominent “neocon”[3] and, interestingly, a trained psychiatrist, writing at the end of 2005 in the neocon journal *The Weekly Standard*, “The Truth about Torture: It's time to be honest about doing terrible things.” He begins by categorizing types of enemies and reaches the heart of his subject:

“Third, there is the terrorist with information. Here the issue of torture gets complicated and the easy pieties don't so easily apply. Let's take the textbook case. Ethics 101: A terrorist has planted a nuclear bomb in New York City. It will go off in one hour. A million people will die. You capture the terrorist. He knows where it is. He's not talking.

“Question: If you have the slightest belief that hanging this man by his thumbs will get you the information to save a million people, are you permitted to do it?

“Now, on most issues regarding torture, I confess tentativeness and uncertainty. But on this issue, there can be no uncertainty: Not only is it permissible to hang this miscreant by his thumbs. It is a moral duty.”[4]

We have traveled a long way down the torture road since 1982 — not least in the emergence of men like Krauthammer, many following the arguments of Carl Schmitt (a legal and political theorist in Germany, a member of the Nazi Party referred to as “Crown Jurist of the Third Reich”) on the necessity for secrecy in government and the adjustment, indeed suspension, of the rule of law in wartime to legitimize exigent situations (“states of exception”). Thus, legal policy in wartime,



A title overlays images from an Armed Forces recruiting ad showing a fighter pilot inspecting his craft before takeoff.



Another magazine cover represents a feature article on terrorism with a masked figure holding a handgun.

however defined, is not abandoned but formed around government-identified needs.

Schmitt's ideas were put in fateful combination with those of the German Jewish émigré professor Leo Strauss. Strauss propounded an authoritarian theory of government in which rulers are far superior to the masses of the governed, who need to be kept in the dark on most policy issues. A populist "myth" needs to cover a hidden elite truth. Thus, in philosophy there is an exoteric message and an esoteric one, the true meaning of the text; a Straussian would argue that Machiavelli's sole error was his failure to keep his prescriptions secret. At the University of Chicago, Strauss's students were known as a "cabal," with a reputation for forming "truth squads," harassing those who disagreed with their ideas. A number of Strauss's acolytes went on to seize the reins of the Republican Party and to enter government, where many of these so-called neoconservatives hold sway. Members of this group in and around government, academe, and influential small policy journals have included Paul Wolfowitz, Allan Bloom, William Kristol, Leon Kass, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert Kagan. Many are familiar for their statist enthusiasm for war making and empire.

The velvet glove has come off, and under a ferocious secrecy, the United States has returned to the business of protecting its global hegemony, by sweet talk, posturing, and, if necessary, aggressive actions. A requisite step has been the identification, for public consumption, of a new, quasi-mythical enemy to replace the fallen Evil Empire (as Reagan's speech writer dubbed the Soviet Union back in 1982, as we see in my video). The designated new demon is the Muslim Other, an enemy that came into clearer focus in the persons of criminal attackers such as those who crashed their planes into New York's World Trade Center in 2001.

There is no doubt that many in the Muslim world are sworn enemies of the United States, or, further, that there are now international networks of militant Muslims, and their supporters, who want to attack the United States and its allies and inflict large numbers of casualties among civilians (the hallmark of terrorism). Understanding their motives and tactics is critical to deterring their actions and preventing their success. But, one hardly need stress, the question of who *we* are, of what values we uphold and practices we follow, remains at issue. A popular slogan since the attacks of September 11, 2001, has it that if we do such and such, the terrorists win. But it is impossible not to notice that the eight years of the Bush-Cheney administration have gone far toward instituting something of a police state, and an ever-greater expenditure on military matters.[5]

At the same time, the nation is being stripped of many of its long-held legal and ethical principles — among them, indeed, fundamental elements (such as *habeas corpus*) of much of our legal system. Can we fail to see this as a victory for those who deplore the Western rule of law, with its Enlightenment values that stress a person's ability to conduct public and private affairs free from the surveillance of moral police and (at least in principle) of the state? If the question is, won't we turn into them, our barbarian opponents, the answer surely depends on defining the characteristics of them. But by the logic (the mythos) underlying this point of view, *they* are the forces of darkness and *we* are the forces of light; therefore, anything *we* do is done for the cause of

ments. Opponents of the death penalty, for example, are forever insisting that executing a murderer will not bring back his victim (as if the purpose of capital punishment

There are situations in which it is not merely permissible but morally mandatory.

were supposed to be resurrection, not deterrence or retribution). But torture, in the cases described, is intended not to bring anyone back but to keep innocents from being dispatched. The most powerful argument against using torture as a punishment or to secure confessions is that such practices disregard the rights of the individual. Well, if the individual is all that important—and he is—it is correspondingly important to protect the rights of individuals threatened by terrorists. If life is so valuable that it must never be taken, the lives of the innocents must be saved even at the price of hurting the one who endangers them.

Krauthammer: "Question: If you have the slightest belief that hanging this man by his thumbs will get you the information to save a million people, are you permitted to do it?"



Media converted to an entertainment model.

good, while our opponents can never cross the divide into goodness without sharing our attitudes and goals and accepting our hegemony. We simply cannot become evil barbarians; we cannot become them, though they can become our junior partners, allies, or even silent members of a grateful world.

And who are they? How can we tell? It has turned out to be simple: Any sign of serious dissent from our leading policies on the part of any group, anywhere, leads to the suggestion that that group (or nation) is not a friend, or worse, that it is an active opponent that could at any moment rise to the level of enemy. We have a list of candidates waiting in the wings: Iran, Syria, North Korea, even Pakistan, and possibly our old familiar enemy, Russia. Any crime or designated outrage will serve to justify to a believing public the most barbaric and inhuman treatment of our enemies, all for the cause of good. More often than not, outrageous incidents are invented or framed as part of a campaign of disinformation — a term of art for systematic government lying, also termed psyop (psychological operations), against the home audience, a practice pursued with single-minded determination since the Reagan White House (but with special fondness and dedication by the Republicans). It is the systematicity of the message — what George Bush has called “catapulting the propaganda” — that creates others as them, defined out of the category of humanity and repositioned as subhuman, fanatical, indefatigable murderous beasts. This Manichaean figure of the Enemy has been with us a long time.

To quote former vice-president Al Gore (commenting on what many less politically prominent people have remarked upon — at least since Harold Lasswell's *Propaganda Technique in the World War* [1927] and advertising and public relations pioneer Edward Bernays' *Propaganda* [1928]) —

"The potential for manipulating mass opinions and feelings initially discovered by commercial advertisers is now being even more aggressively exploited by a new generation of media Machiavellis."

Who makes up the “new generation of media Machiavellis”? It is sufficient to name one, of course, Rupert Murdoch, and sufficient, as well, to look at his creation of the television network Fox, under the leadership of a Republican party operative, Roger Ailes. Fox relies on Murdoch's long experience in trolling the bottom of the print media tabloids in England and Australia, exploiting gossip, scandal, and demagoguery. Like most of Murdoch's outlets, Fox's programming is a cover for its demagogic political message, whose Machiavellian slogans are “We Report, You Decide” and, more to the point, “Fair and Balanced.”^[6] Changes in the U.S. “media landscape” include the great slide in public confidence in media objectivity (prominently featuring the desire to “blame the messenger” for the defeat in Vietnam, a tendency promoted by the right, both in and out of government) and the corollary repeal, under Ronald Reagan, of the Fairness Doctrine. The latter was a rule of telecommunications that had previously kept broadcast media from precisely the partisanship that Fox represents.^[7]

A related development has been the conversion of all forms of media to an entertainment model, egged on by media concentration in ever-fewer corporate hands and abetted by their aggressive demands for



ever-greater returns to shareholders, including from print media like daily papers even as readership undergoes precipitous decline. We might observe that by the mid 1960s, the Paris-based Situationists had systematically described the central importance of the image world for the conduct of advanced industrial (and post-industrial) Western capitalist society, which they consequently dubbed the Society of the Spectacle.

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Enemies are Others, defined outside the category of humanity.



Newspaper clippings pile up, revealing military involvement in secret "anti-terrorist" activities.



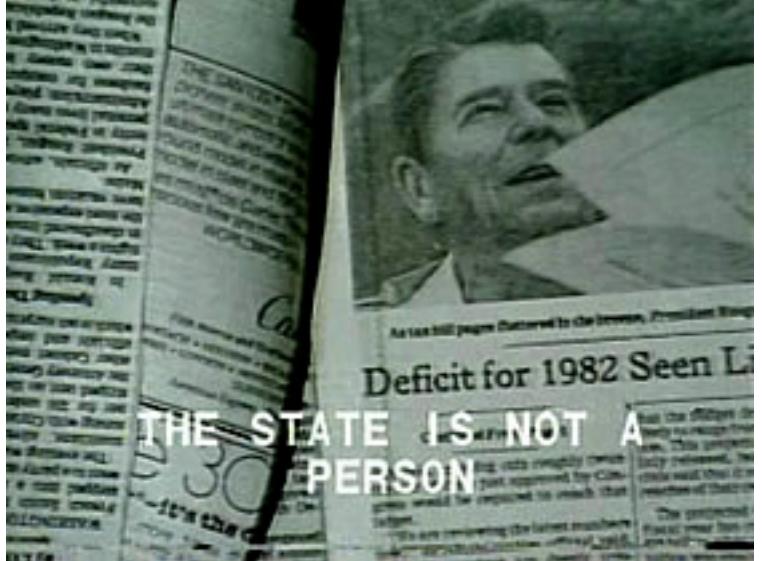
Time magazine cover image represents Reaganomics: cutting social spending, increasing military spending; tax cuts for the rich (and inflating a huge deficit).

II.

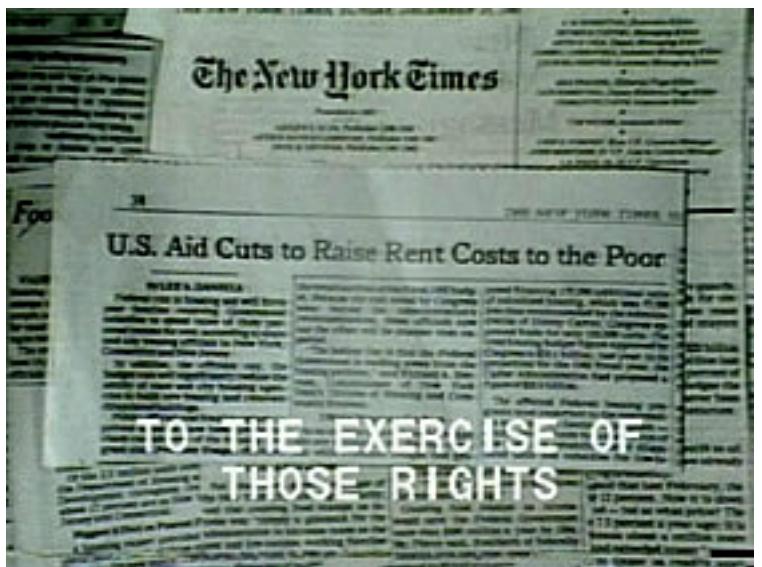
A recurrent Latin American scenario to justify torture has been the proposition, "Suppose a little girl has been kidnapped" in the urban jungle? What police officer would not in good conscience torture half the city to find her and bring her home to her desperate parents? At present our script is different. We torture — or we don't torture, the story goes, we subject our non-uniformed, stateless enemy combatants to moderate stress and pressure short of outright organ failure.[8][[open endnotes in new window](#)] And we do this to protect the Homeland and the republic from "bad news" that (in the words of Administration figures from George Bush to Condoleezza Rice to Colin Powell) "could take the form of a mushroom cloud." Or we send our captured "evildoers" to other countries where they know what to do with them, our president has let us know, with a wink and a chuckle.[9] In the 1980s, as we waged our dirty little — generally proxy — wars in Central and South America,[10] the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) manual for interrogation was leaked, causing great embarrassment and public disavowal by the military and the CIA and apparently its eventual removal from use.[11] The impetus of our tactics for wringing information out of people using psychological techniques supposedly resulted from the observation of the apparent ease with which U.S. troops during the Korean War gave up information or joined the other side (this saw the birth of the term "brainwashing") as well as the earlier observation of the public confession of the Hungarian Cardinal Mindszenty during his 1949 show trial for crimes against the communist state.

Techniques designed to break down personality were the subject of secret experiments for the next decades, with important research done by one of Canada's most prominent psychiatrists working with U.S. forces. The more recent protocols for interrogation, the ones in use now — known as SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) — grew out of these investigations and were developed by psychologists training U.S. forces to withstand interrogation by an enemy. The planned-for methods attributed to the barbarians, or so the story goes, underwent a turnabout and were adopted as our own methods. These include, in addition to cruder methods, sleep deprivation, extreme isolation, and sensory deprivation, and the application of other means of softening people up psychologically, creating systems of rewards and manipulating their terrors, with the aim of making them emotionally dependent. (As a Latin American torturer supposedly remarked to one of his victims long ago, "We make reality in here.")

It should be no surprise that — presumably like all governments — our government abuses people when it decides it is in the national interest, no matter how narrowly that interest defined. What is different about the present moment is the country's apparent willingness to publicly embrace cruelty, albeit by another name, and to insist on the need for



Questioning one of the philosopher's central assumptions, that the state can be discussed as if it were an individual human. The video begins to question the rhetoric of sliding from "we" citizens to the state to the state as personified in the President.



Headlines reveal the effects of Reaganomics: worsening conditions for the poor.



Videomaker Rosler continues the simple desktop style of presentation. She uses toys of military vehicles and

astonishingly widespread, open-ended surveillance of the home population (a signal characteristic of a police state). These actions are carried out by the CIA and the military alike, although the CIA has never before, it seems, had such widespread involvement in detention and interrogation, as opposed to intelligence collection (spying), on the one hand, and covert operations (killing), on the other.

The longer these stark changes in accepted practice go on without causing the government to fall (in whatever way that might happen in our system), the more emboldened the government becomes, and the more such practices and their rhetorical accompaniments are normalized. The "harsh" tactics now in regular use, if not always publicly acknowledged, include not only beating, sleep deprivation, waterboarding and forcible injection of fluids into bodily orifices as well as other violations of bodily integrity, simulated preparation for execution, prolonged exposure to cold or heat, stress positions, confinement in tiny, dark (or conversely, permanently lit), very loud, unceasing music or muffled spaces but also, by and large, virtually all the things Nazis were vilified for doing[12] — and perhaps more sophisticated torments.

Here is Charles Krauthammer, in his column cited above:

"We have recently learned that since 9/11 the United States has maintained a series of 'black sites' around the world, secret detention centers where presumably high-level terrorists like Khalid Sheikh Mohammed have been imprisoned. The world is scandalized ... [but] I feel reassured. It would be a gross dereliction of duty for any government not to keep Khalid Sheikh Mohammed isolated, disoriented, alone, despairing, cold and sleepless, in some godforsaken hidden location in order to find out what he knew about plans for future mass murder. What are we supposed to do? Give him a nice cell in a warm Manhattan prison, complete with Miranda rights, a mellifluent lawyer, and his own website?... Let's assume (and hope) that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed has been kept in one of these black sites, say, a cell somewhere in Romania, held entirely incommunicado and subjected to [this] kind of 'coercive interrogation.'"

In the *New Yorker* issue out on the stands as I write, Jane Mayer describes the treatment of KSM (as Mohammed is called by his captors), supplying some of the details Krauthammer glosses over, and which the International Committee of the Red Cross has, in a confidential report, suggested is illegal according to international law. But Krauthammer, and no doubt millions of his fellow Americans, is reassured.[13]

Just as President Bush today denounces the Taliban as brutal, cold-blooded killers but fails to consider what it means systematically to employ air force bombers, ordnance-dropping drones operated from an air base in the Western United States, or the newly announced bomb-carrying battlefield robots on a largely civilian population in Afghanistan and Iraq (not to mention landmines, cluster bombs, white phosphorus, or depleted uranium), the rationale surely is, "If we do it, it is all right." If we violate international treaties and our own bodies of law in torturing people, surely it is all right. Can we doubt that the

toy soldiers to represent U.S. military activities.

majority of German citizens under the Nazis thought that as well?

III.

Back in 1982, I was pretty shaken by the pro-torture article and saw many ironies in the way it was embedded in that issue of *Newsweek*, one of the country's top two weekly news magazines. There it was, among the aforementioned article about a New Realism in painting, as well as a hateful set of letters about the adoption of a new posture of "victimhood," identified by the eagle-eyed right, in those long-suffering groups who had finally protested getting the short end of the stick when it came to voting rights, wages, and social and economic opportunities of all kinds: women, blacks, Latinos, gays, native people — all those "whiners" and "weepers" unsatisfied with their lot, along with criminals who did not want to be put to death, and the potentiaters of all of that crap that made America weak and ungovernable... and economically less productive (because less disciplined by fears of unemployment) than Americans ought to be (and would be, darn soon).

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 had brought about a different sort of New Realism, in which hard-hearted, "Go ahead, make my day" attitudes,[14] expressed with a theatrically practiced nasty swagger and a steely glint in the eye, would replace empathy and "love" (a signature sixties' idea). Jingoistic patriotism and militarism would replace Carter's international focus on "human rights." Never mind the conscious appeal to racism and Christian suprematism that underlay the new mood, calculated to bring America out of the Jimmy Carter post-Vietnam malaise into a "U.S.A! U.S.A!" moment. Conflating civil religion — always a favorite of the American right — with fundamentalist Christianity, Reagan told a gathering of evangelical ministers that the fact that the United States was set between the two oceans meant God had intended us to rule the Continent (compare Mr. Bush, Jr.'s, apparent discovery, 25 years later, that planes could cross the oceans and harm us).

In tune with this new aggressive national mood of triumphalism and assertive messianism, advertising began to feature outsize desires for luxury goods, powerful cars, big houses, financial services (this was the "Greed is good" era), and, not coincidentally, images of sexy (and often covertly submissive) women and dominant white men, some of them appearing in this very issue of *Newsweek*.[15] Ruling the continent meant, it seems, what had already been enunciated, early in the 19th century, as the Monroe Doctrine: the control of North and South — and, of course, Central — America and, for that matter, the Caribbean. This is what is colloquially referred to as "our backyard."

IV.

My response to *Newsweek*'s feature was to make a videotape that would tie the pro-torture article to global and national trends — geopolitical "facts on the ground" and the presumed neo-imperialism exercised through information technologies, from data management to cultural products such as movies and music to advertising. I saw the pro-torture article as embedded in a stream of ads, letters, articles, and pictures designed to naturalize the U.S. worldview and simultaneously to instill fear in Americans through warnings about banking crises and a



Headlines reveal the Cold War connections between escalating military activity, foreign policy, and capitalist economics.



At her desk, Rosler looks at her face in a hand mirror. Key books for the analysis are on the desk — such as Amnesty International's annual human rights reports and Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*.



Headlines about Reagan's self-stated willingness to use nuclear weapons in both strategic and conventional wars underline the video's case: it is actually the U.S. that uses nuclear weapons as a coercive threat and this is a form of state terrorism.

THE POSTAL SERVICE HAS A 300-PAGE PLAN FOR CONTINUING NORMAL FIRST-CLASS DELIVERY TO SURVIVORS. NUCLEAR EMERGENCY CHANGE-OF-ADDRESS FORMS ARE READY NOW IN POST OFFICES AROUND THE COUNTRY

Video character-generated scrolls underline U.S. preparation for nuclear war.



Sitting in a car in Brooklyn, Rosler looks across the river at Manhattan, the imagined target of the

generalized xenophobia, a fear of the rest of the world. This was a bombardment of terrors and distractions that would decenter the citizens of the Society of the Spectacle and warn them to step back from the edge of political engagement into the cocoon of private preoccupations. I had no desire to make a discursive documentary that would deconstruct the torture essay point by point, poking holes in its sophistic arguments. Nor did I want to make a work as slick as advertising in its visuals or visually arresting through the use of torture photos, which I believed would replicate the pacification of viewers that is a hallmark of spectacle culture.

Instead, "torture" would be invoked through the steady bombardment of the viewer by ordinary forms of corporate information transmission, mixed in with more reliable sources. The scene was set for the work in the video studio, in my waterfront loft, and in the city; with the use of books and toys; but most of all amidst the barrage of print, radio, and television that was coming to mediate (some might say dominate) our daily lives and experience, both private and public. The tape was meant as a meditation of sorts on the worldview implied by Levin's article, taking up a few of its risibly offensive arguments but trying to look past it through the information blitz.

The work opens with a car ride across the Manhattan Bridge into Lower Manhattan backed by a music score (recorded by a band I had met in Banff, Alberta, where I began working on the video) and a reading of most of Levin's article. Throughout, the relationship between economic and political insecurity is stressed, just as Levin's article is shown to be placed next to an ad showing a sleepless man worrying about his money that nonetheless offers the reassurance that America's banks are secure.

The first ten minutes on the work center on the article, employing what was then an innovation: large words isolated on or moving across the screen and very tight pans across print images and headlines. [16] The separation of visual and audio tracks begins. With ordinary people reading a voiceover script interrogating Professor Levin's article, the work moves into a blizzard of articles that slide past the screen, their headlines teasing the eye, a visual ballet on which was overlaid an intermittent crawling text and, on the soundtrack, radio clips accompanying the script. The visual and sound clips address terrorism; the Red Army Faction (the "Baader-Meinhof" group) and the draconian German responses; the torture of women; U.S. and worldwide economic trends; and advertising. One section asks if the torturer will be a civil servant, and at what pay grade, and whether an injured torturer would receive workmen's compensation; in reality, of course, torturers, like executioners, are shielded from public view.[17] The central focus of the video is on state terrorism and torture primarily in Central and South America, often with U.S. complicity, as well as on the newly prominent nuclear brinksmanship, not to mention the way in which the media convey government messages and disinformation.

The voiceover comments:

"Atomic terrorists hold the entire population hostage? The real source of atomic terrorism is not terrorists. It is the State. ... The philosopher [Levin] ascribes to the nightmare terrorists the threat the United States has repeatedly visited on the world....

philosopher's "ticking nuclear bomb" fantasy. The 1983 image, with the World Trade Center as part of the cityscape, acquires another layer of irony post 9/11. In contradistinction to the philosopher's fantasies, that attack was not part of a blackmail scheme and was decidedly low-tech and without warning. It could not have been forewarned or stopped by any amount of torture.



In contrast to the philosopher's hypothetical victims, the actual victims of terrorism such as the "disappeared" in Argentina, the raped, tortured, and executed in Central America, and Palestine civilians in Lebanon are evoked.



The fantasy of persecution is contagious. To imagine disaster is in some way to desire it.

Why does the philosopher choose this moment to write of atomic terrorism? Why does *Newsweek* publish it?"

The video, using text and various found footage and images, explores the commands reportedly given to the Latin American torturers to feel no pity toward their victims; in a "torture class,"

"troops were told that watching will make you feel more like a man. The officer added that they should not feel pity for anyone but only hate for those who are enemies of our country."

(In the current battles there has been repeated testimony by U.S. soldiers that abuse and torture of prisoners, as suggested by some of their trophy photos from Abu Ghraib, were treated as an occasion for partying and group hilarity.)

A further section of the work details the particular abuses heaped upon women, children, and babies, both those detained and tortured and those left behind when men are abducted and killed. It then spends some time exploring Hannah Arendt's concepts of totalitarianism and relating them to developments in Latin America:

"In the last and fully totalitarian stage ... the concepts of the objective enemy and the logically possible crime are abandoned, the victims chosen completely at random.... The innocent and the guilty are equally undesirable. The change in the concept of crime and criminal determines the new and terrible methods of the totalitarian secret police „, undesirables disappear from the face of the earth; the only trace they leave behind is the memory of those who knew and loved them, and one of the most difficult tasks of the secret police is to make sure that even such traces will disappear...."

The voiceover continues:

"Disappearance was used by the Nazis in the occupied territories in the Forties under the Nacht und Nebel (Night and Fog) Decree to dispose of people 'endangering German security' by means of what Field Marshal Keitel described as 'effective intimidation.'

"At the First Latin American Congress of Relatives of the Disappeared, held in Costa Rica in January 1981, the estimate given for disappeared men, women, and children over the past two decades was 90 thousand. By contrast, the CIA's recent estimate of the total number of deaths resulting from 'international terrorist' violence for the period 1968 to 1980 is 3,668, or about 4 percent of the disappeared in Latin America alone. Although the Congress on the Disappeared presented testimony from 12 Latin countries, it wasn't mentioned in the U.S. press. If there were a similar congress on East Bloc disappeared, with mothers reporting on their disappeared children, would the media overlook it?

"On June 21, 1980, 30 Guatemalan labor leaders were seized by para-military forces, packed into trucks, and disappeared;



Rosler crowns Professor Levin a "philosopher king."

no mention in the U.S. media. Suppose that Lech Walesa and 29 others Polish labor leaders had been seized by the Polish authorities and disappeared like the 30 Guatemalans — imagine the U.S. response."

In an interlude, a tenor sings an a cappella song whose lyrics center on economic woes, jungle imagery, the new investment value of art, and the taste for authoritarian leadership and patriarchalist neo-neo-expressionist painting in times of uncertainty. It begins,

"When the economy shrinks, the whole world shrinks.
Darkness and chaos press in all around ..."

In a later verse:

"Look out for your money, your kids and your wife
If you don't want to worry the rest of your life.
Money money money money money.
Green is gold, gold is green
No rate of profit is really obscene
As long as I can get it.
Gold is the color of all the best things
Gold is the color of oil and big paintings."

From the video's voiceover:

"Just as the philosopher [Levin — or, say, Krauthammer, or U.S. government officials] imagines that the State has individual rights, he imagines that bad people give up their individual rights — his terrorists *cease to be* individual humans. ... Some of the most 'civilized' political candidates supported the death penalty not as a deterrent but as 'simple justice' — that is, retribution. Iran's retribution is barbarism, ours is justice.

'Distrust all in whom the impulse to punish is powerful' — Nietzsche"

On the screen this text appears:

"People who demand 'law and order' are the first to want to get rid of it at their convenience and whim. In the halls of state and in the press, the ayatollahs were castigated for 'medieval barbarism' by the same people demanding retribution against criminals as U.S. state policy — which put them in absolute accord with those in the street shouting fuck iran and nuke the ayatollah.

As usual, we project onto those we call our enemies the criminal acts we want to commit.

V.

The final section of the video uses philosopher Michel Foucault's portentous discussion, in *Discipline and Punish*, of the role of torture and hanging in the public square and their changing effect through time on the sentiment of the crowd, whose growing restiveness finally led executions to be moved out of public view. (Reform movements

presumably led to the eschewal of torture in favor of confinement and “correction.”)

"In these executions, which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince, there was a whole aspect of the carnival, in which rules were inverted, authority mocked and criminals transformed into heroes. ... But above all — and this was why these disadvantages became a political danger — the people never felt closer to those who paid the penalty than in those rituals intended to show the horror of the crime and the invincibility of power; never did the people feel more threatened, like them, by a legal violence exercised without moderation or restraint. ... [O]ut of the ceremony of the public execution, ... it was this solidarity much more than the sovereign power that was likely to emerge with redoubled strength. The reformers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not to forget that the executions did not, in fact, frighten the people. One of their first cries was to demand their abolition."

A hand reaches into the frame and places a tiny gold crown on the photo of the torture column's author, as the characteristics of the strongman political leader appear on the screen.

hawk
lean
sinewy
manly
man on a white horse
possessed of secret knowledge
masterful
dominator
self assured
tough
tough minded
in the know

The final words, a quote from Adorno (from his book *Minima Moralia*) are apparently spoken — thanks to the miracle of video editing — by an ABC reporter standing on a street corner somewhere. They are, in part:

"Psychology knows that he who imagines disasters in some way desires them.... The fantasy of persecution is contagious. ... The fulfillment of persecution fantasies springs from their affinity to bloody realities.... Even the worst, most senseless representations of events, the wildest projections, contain the unconscious effort of consciousness to recognize the fatal flaw by which society perpetuates its existence."

The work closes with a series of propositions, both chanted and floating on the screen, suggest what might make authoritarianism attractive, even to a democratic electorate.

order is more important than law.
law is more important than justice.
security is more important than freedom.
money is more important than mercy.

VI.

A Simple Case for Torture is a work begun in 1982 about the saber-rattling militarism and “small wars” that were held to be the picture of war fighting for the foreseeable future (despite the constant invocation of the nuclear threat). Some of this picture has stayed the same, but, as I have argued, among the worst contemporary developments is the all-but-public official embrace of torture as a regular method of obtaining information from detainees and terrorizing everyone else, along with the concomitant suspension of the writ of habeas corpus, the arrogation to the president of monarchic privilege, and the advancing of a surveillance society. That society is also increasingly divided into the very rich and the poor, in a process that long ago was called, by Noam Chomsky and others, the Latin Americanization of the United States. That process has always included the use of physical abuse, torture, disappearance, and extra-judicial killing as part of the arsenal of coercion on behalf of economic and political elites. The task falls, as it always has to the citizens, to press back against these abuses and to work to create a human community marked by justice and universal rights.

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Notes

"A Case for Torture Redux" is © Martha Rosler, 2007

1. On March 16, 1968, a Company of the U.S. Army murdered between 350 and 504 defenseless civilians, primarily women, old men, and babies, in the village of My Lai in the hamlet of Son My in South Vietnam. Many of the victims, especially women, were abused before the massacre, and some survivors afterward. Initial reports to officers and civilian authorities were ignored despite photographic evidence and testimony. It was the photographic evidence of dead children that finally prevented a cover up. Although 26 soldiers and officers were charged, only one, Lieutenant William Calley, was convicted of any crime. Calley was convicted of murder and sentenced to life imprisonment, but through a series of interventions and reviews, including one by President Nixon, Calley served only about 3 years, mostly under house arrest. Calley wrote, in self-justification:

"We weren't in Mylai to kill human beings, really. We were there to kill *ideology* that is carried by—I don't know. Pawns. Blobs. Pieces of flesh, and I wasn't in Mylai to destroy intelligent men. I was there to destroy an intangible idea. To destroy communism.... I looked at communism as a Southerner looks at a Negro, supposedly. *It's evil. It's bad.*" (pp. 104-105)

Also: "And babies. On babies everyone's really hung up. 'But babies! The little innocent babies!' of course, we've been in Vietnam for ten years now. If we're in Vietnam another ten, if your son is killed by those babies you'll cry at me, 'Why didn't you kill those babies that day?'.... We stopped the peoples [sic] and one of the GIs asked, 'What are we to do with them?' I said, 'Well, everything is to be killed—.'" (pp. 102-103)

A scant few years later, Argentine dictator Jorge Videla Redondo, leader of a junta that presided over the extrajudicial torture and murder of about 30 thousand of its citizens, is reported to have opined,

"A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb, but also someone who spreads ideas that are contrary to Western and Christian civilizations." [\[return to page one\]](#)

2. Levin was later embroiled in a racist controversy with an African American professor at his college and, more recently, he has been noted as a regular attendee of conferences run by a white suprematist group, American Renaissance.

3. The term “neoconservative,” shortened to “neocon,” designates a hawkish right-wing scourge, often a former Cold War liberal or even a Trotskyist, in favor of aggressive foreign expansionism and a national security state under a “unitary executive” rather than the Constitutionally mandated tripartite government. The term is meant to differentiate those so designated from “paleocons” (paleo- is the Greek prefix denoting old), more traditional conservatives who are generally anti-statist and often against foreign military involvement. These groups are at loggerheads over the disastrously intrusive, and monstrously expensive, policies of the Bush-Cheney administration.

4. *The Weekly Standard*, December 5, 2005 (Vol. 11, issue 12). Krauthammer chooses to illustrate his argument with a cartoon version of torture while presumably knowing quite well that much more systematic and sophisticated methods are in use. See below.

5.. Military historian Andrew J. Bacevich, in a review article in the *Nation* (“The Semiwarriors,” April 23, 2007), describes the increasing militarization of U.S. foreign policy under successive postwar administrations. Bacevich refers to the reigning theory as “semiwar,” using a term coined by James Forrestal, the first Secretary of Defense when that department was created after the end of the Second World War. Bacevich traces the decline in the power of ordinary citizens and the Congress to this (covert) doctrine of governance, in which the president is more and more conceived of as “the commander in chief” rather than as a civilian head of state in charge of one branch of government among a triad of coequals. Under this doctrine, the government operates by a rule of secrecy that fits well with the Straussian and neoconservative ideology outlined above. See also Hannah Arendt’s review of the Pentagon Papers, astonishingly contemporary in its observations (“Lying in Politics: Reflections on The Pentagon Papers,” *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 17, No. 8, Nov. 18, 1971).

6. An essay could be devoted to that particular slogan, but let me simply observe that surveys have revealed that the more people watch Fox, the less they know about public events; the signal delusion here is that Saddam Hussein was responsible for the events of September 11.

7. The decision that long-settled telecommunications law and regulations did not apply to cablecasts, as they did to broadcast media, was part of this great change.

8. A standard provided to President Bush by his obliging lawyers Alberto Gonzales (a former real estate lawyer and George Bush’s obliging ancilla in the Texas statehouse) and John Yoo (a young right-wing lawyer whose opinions defended unlimited Presidential power in wartime and declared

sections of the Geneva Conventions of the treatment of prisoners to be obsolete), with the help of David Addington, a senior aide to Vice President Dick Cheney. Think of Carl Schmitt in this context.

9. Despite this, on January 27th, 2005, President Bush told the *New York Times* that “torture is never acceptable, nor do we hand over people to countries that do torture”—see [Jane Mayer](#), “Outsourcing Torture: The Secret History of America’s ‘Extraordinary Rendition’ Program,” *New Yorker*, Feb. 14, 2005. Several cases that subsequently have come to light have provided the president a liar, including that of the Syrian-born Canadian engineer Maher Arar, cited by Mayer as having been kidnapped, thanks to faulty intelligence from Canadians, while in transit in 2002 through a U.S. airport and sent to Syria for months of torture. (Arar, released over a year later, subsequently received a public apology, not from the U.S., but from the Canadian government, which also provided him with a financial settlement.) Although most references to “rendition,” or abduction and relegation of people whom U.S. agents have kidnapped, describe them as having been sent to Syria, Yemen, Libya, Jordan, Morocco, and other draconian regimes whom we otherwise denounce for their lack of “human rights,” the U.S. has also sent such prisoners to its own newly constructed, highly technologized secret prisons in countries like Poland and Romania, in the Russian “near abroad,” the counterpart of our Latin American and Caribbean “back yard.” It has been alleged that Germany has also secretly held such prisoners for the U.S.. Rendition is the prelude to mistreatment and torture.

On the matter of kidnapping and transport, or rendition, here is Jane Mayer, “Outsourcing Torture,” cited above:

“In 1998, Congress passed legislation declaring that it is ‘the policy of the United States not to expel, extradite, or otherwise effect the involuntary return of any person to a country in which there are substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of being subjected to torture, regardless of whether the person is physically present in the United States.’”

As Mayer notes, however, the Bush government claimed that “new rules of engagement” required a “New Paradigm” (as named by then-White House counsel Alberto Gonzales) to deal with “stateless terrorists” and quickly extract information from captives. Days after the events of September 11, 2001, Vice-President Dick Cheney made his notorious “dark side” remark on a television talk show, earning him the epithet Darth Vader (the evil opponent in the Star Wars movies) among the liberal blogs: we will

“work through, sort of, the dark side.A lot of what needs to be done here will have to be done quietly, without any discussion, using sources and methods that are available to our intelligence agencies, if we’re going to be successful. That’s the world these folks operate in. And so it’s going to be vital for us to use any means at our disposal, basically, to achieve our objective” (*ibid*).

10. Our proxy fighters included not only those called the Contras (counterrevolutionaries), in Nicaragua but also, according to journalists on the scene, Israeli and South Korean combat units in several Central American countries.

11. A [secret Department of Defense report](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/index.htm#dod1992) —*Improper Material in Spanish-Language Intelligence Manuals* (10 March 1992)—written for then Secretary of Defense Richard Cheney. warned that ‘U.S. Army intelligence manuals that incorporated the earlier work of the CIA for training Latin American military officers in interrogation and counterintelligence techniques contained ‘offensive and objectionable material’ that ‘undermines U.S. credibility, and could result in significant embarrassment.’” From The National Security Archive document “Prisoner Abuse: Patterns from the Past,” <http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB122/index.htm#dod1992>.

According the Archive, the Carter administration had halted the counterintelligence training programs at the U.S. School of the Americas, then in Panama, but the program, including the use of the same manuals, was reinstated by President Reagan in 1982 and was in use for the next nine years, until Cheney accepted the recommendations contained in *Improper Material*. A further CIA manual dated July 1963, *KUBARK Counterintelligence Interrogation* (KUBARK is simply the CIA itself), is a guide for obtaining information from so-called resistant sources; it outlines techniques that have become all too familiar from the revelations about the present campaigns.

It has reliably been alleged that French torturers, veterans of the unspeakable Algerian War of the early 1960s, trained South Americans in their techniques, including an emphasis on the physical humiliation, that has now become a feature of U.S. methods in the Arab world.

12. Vilified in the Allied press, by legal authorities in the postwar Nuremberg trials, and in a floodtide of popular postwar movies.

13. Jane Mayer, “The Black Sites: A Rare Look Inside the C.I.A.’s Secret Interrogation Program,” *New Yorker*, August 13, 2007, pp. 46-57.

14. The phrase, which is an invitation to malefactors to provide an excuse to be shot and killed, was featured in *Sudden Impact* (1983), a popular movie in the Dirty Harry vengeance-driven police cycle featuring the right wing actor Clint Eastwood. Reagan picked up the phrase soon afterward.

15. Earlier, in the 1970s, the more overtly sex-oriented and whites-only advertisements had largely disappeared, in tune with the public sentiments reinforcing the social movements of the day.

16. Very soon after, with the improvement of character generation and of broadcast-quality macro lenses, these effects would become a regular feature of advertisements, a development that undercuts how present-day audiences

see this portion of this work.

17. And increasingly they are contract laborers, such as the interrogators furnished by the determinedly secretive, 1.6 billion-dollar firm CACI, implicated by name in some of the abuses at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Mercenaries from various countries and other contractors make up about half of the U.S. forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and perhaps elsewhere.

"It's insanity," said Robert Baer, a former CIA agent... concerned about the private contractors' free-ranging role. 'These are rank amateurs and there is no legally binding law on these guys as far as I could tell. ...' The Pentagon had no comment on the role of contractors at Abu Ghraib...."

— Julian Borger, "U.S. military in torture scandal: Use of private contractors in Iraqi jail interrogations highlighted by inquiry into abuse of prisoners," *The Guardian*, April 30, 2004.

The report on the Abu Ghraib abuses by U.S. General Antonio Taguba claims that Steven Stephanowicz had encouraged MPs [Military Police] under his command to terrorize inmates, and "clearly knew his instructions equated to physical abuse."

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